Stryker in

Story by Steve Harding

WHEN the soldiers of the Army's Stryker Brigade Combat Team took their innovative vehicles to the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, Calif., a few months ago, they knew they'd be challenged by the harsh desert and NTC's world-class opposing force.

What they didn't expect was the intensity of the news media's focus on every aspect of the Stryker's performance.

"Yes, we seem to be attracting a fair amount of attention," said MAJ James Lechner, executive officer of the 5th Battalion, 20th Infantry. "It seems like just about everybody is interested in how we do out here."

That interest is not surprising, Lechner said, given that the Fort Lewis, Wash.-based SBCT — formally known as 3rd Bde., 2nd Inf. Division — is a key component of the Army's transformation strategy.

"This is a new type of unit, using cutting-edge systems," he said. "The Army has invested a lot of time, effort, money and technology in us, and now it's time for us to show what we can do." *(continued on page 16)*

the Spotlight

A Stryker infantry carrier vehicle of the Fort Lewis-based 3rd Bde., 2nd Inf. Div., is dwarfed by the vast open spaces of the National Training Center during Army Transformation Experiment 2002. Steve Harding

An Air Force C-130 brings the first Stryker into NTC's Bicycle Lake Airfield.

Into the Desert

The SBCT's chance to demonstrate its capabilities, while at the same time refining its own operational techniques, came in late July. Sixteen Stryker infantry carrier vehicles and nearly 1,000 3rd Bde. soldiers deployed to NTC to participate in Army Transformation Experiment 2002, the Army component of the much larger joint-services exercise known as Millennium Challenge 2002 *[see sidebar on page 19]*.

"The Army's part of MC 02, ATEx 02, is all about information superiority and rapid and decisive operations," said COL Abe Turner, the 82nd Airborne Div.'s assistant division commander for operations and commander of the Army forces "fighting" at NTC.

"The Strykers can potentially enhance both," he said. "Their onboard electronic systems give them a tremendous ability to send and receive vital intelligence and situational-awareness information, while their speed and maneuverability could contribute tremendously to the overall pace and decisiveness of the battle."

Determining the extent of the Stryker's potential was a major goal of ATEx 02, Turner said, as was finding out how well the vehicle would stand up to the tactical and mechanical challenges of high-tempo operations in a harsh environment.

"We've been training intensely at Fort Lewis and Yakima Training Center, of course," Lechner said. "But this is the first time we've been able to come to the field with a force that accurately replicates our full battalion, with all of the assets and electronic support we're supposed to have, and then work within the framework of a joint force."

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Getting to the Fight

The first example of joint-force operations for the SBCT occurred when its Strykers were airlifted to California aboard Air Force C-17 transports. The vehicles then transferred to smaller C-130s and airlanded at NTC's Bicycle Lake Airfield, which had been "captured" earlier by 750 paratroopers of the 82nd Abn. Div.'s 1st Bn., 325th Inf. Regiment.

"Once the 82nd Abn. had taken the airfield and established a perimeter, we came in to build combat power behind them," Lechner said. "We set up an assembly area, then brought in the Strykers and our tactical operations center."

Because of weight and size limitations, each C-130 brought in just one Stryker, each of which had certain exterior fittings lowered so that soldiers and airmen could safely move around the aircraft's interior once the vehicles were loaded. When the Stryker rolled clear of the plane's ramp, soldiers moved in quickly to raise the antennas, reinstall exterior stowage racks and put the top-mounted weapon system back in place.

"The whole process is fairly simple," Lechner said, "and it takes, on average, only about 15 minutes from the time the Stryker rolls off the C-130 until it's fully combat capable."

(Left) SGT Tom Bradbury

With it's antennas and weapon mount lowered, the Stryker rolls from the C-130's ramp. Mark Loi

Into Battle

The whole purpose of including the SBCT in ATEx 02 was to evaluate the unit's ability to deploy quickly and, once in the operational area, use its unique maneuver capability and information superiority to take decisive action. And that's exactly what the SBCT did over the course of operations at NTC, Lechner said.

The Stryker's first mission was to secure a simulated weapons-of-mass-effect storage area. Manned by soldiers of the SBCT's Company A, 5th Bn., 20th Inf., the vehicles moved on the objective with the speed that is their hallmark.

"We isolated the first objective and a follow-on force secured it," Lechner said. "Then we went on to our second objective, a simulated surface-to-surface missile site."

The attack on the first objective required the Strykers to undertake a grueling 97-mile movement to contact, which they accomplished in just seven hours despite engaging enemy forces en route.

"That shows you one of the Stryker's real strengths," said 1LT Nathan A. Molica, Co. A's executive officer. "There's no other way we could have gotten that number of troops that far in the available time,

The Strykers proved themselves capable of carrying each squad's essential equipment.

Steve Harding

given the enemy situation. And the best part is that when those infantrymen came out the back of the vehicles, they were fresh and ready to fight."

On the downside, Lechner said, the two actions cost Co. A eight Strykers — four in each fight — mainly to enemy tank fire.

"There's no way around it — when light armored vehicles run into tanks unexpectedly, things won't go well," Molica said. "But remember that part of this experiment is to work out the tactics and procedures that will allow the vehicles to avoid such things as ambushes by armored vehicles."

And, Molica pointed out, the Strykers' speed and onboard Force XXI Battle Command-Brigade and Below system helped significantly reduce losses of troops and vehicles throughout the course of ATEx 02.

"The FBCB2 is an absolutely incredible tool," Molica said. "The SBCT has information abilities that other units don't have, and better reconnaissance assets than any other unit in the Army. So we get contact reports, intelligence reports and updates in real time via the FBCB2, and it all comes up right on the screen. The end result is that we can move rapidly over vast distances, know exactly where the objective is and have complete situational awareness en route.

"There are certainly going to be times when you make contact with the enemy unexpectedly," Molica added. "But the idea is to use the Stryker's mobility and the FBCB2 to avoid stumbling blindly around the battlefield. And, by and large, we've been able to do that."

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Challenges and Solutions

Army officials present for ATEx 02 were quick to point out that the event was an experiment that, among other things, was intended to uncover shortcomings in the SBCT concept. And, they acknowledged, there certainly were some.

"No system comes out of this sort of complex and wide-ranging evaluation with a perfect score," Turner said. "And that's the whole point — we want to uncover processes and systems that can be improved on."

One of the key issues, Turner said, was finding ways to better manage and use the tremendous range of information being piped to soldiers at all levels via the Army Battle Command System and FBCB2, among other systems.

"There is a lot going on out here, and we want to understand the best way to gather, disseminate and use the range of information we take in from all our various sensors," Turner said. "And though there have been some challenges in putting everything together, overall we've been very satisfied with all these systems and what they've brought to the decision-making process."

In terms of Stryker itself, soldiers

said NTC's heat and harsh terrain revealed a few problems that hadn't come to light in the less challenging environments at Fort Lewis and Yakima Training Center.

"Without an air conditioner, it can get real warm inside the vehicle," said one Co. A soldier, "and we seem to be having more tire problems here because of the sharp volcanic rock. And it would be nice if the remote weapon system on top of the vehicle was stabilized so we could acquire and engage a target on the move."

"There were other issues as well," Molica said, "though there's no one, overriding problem. It's just the usual series of small things that you find anytime you really put a system through a comprehensive field evaluation.

"And even when things have broken, we've been able to get them back on line very quickly," he added. "The mechanics have been right out here with us, living with us day to day. They've prepositioned spare parts and tires and such, and as soon as a vehicle goes down the mechanics are right on it. Overall, we've found Stryker to be very capable; it has a lot going for it."

Among Stryker's many strengths, said Co. A's soldiers, are its speed and firepower.

"This vehicle gets us to the fight quickly and the ride is great, so when we get to the objective we're not tired and our feet aren't sore," said PV2 Joseph Hurst. "It gives us better cover, and the onboard weapons provide a lot of good support."

"The ride is great," agreed SPC Richard Watson. "This vehicle will take us to the fight — even up a 60-degree hill — and when we get there a full infantry squad comes out the back. And it will carry all we need — ammunition, water, rucks — everything.

"Mobility is definitely the best thing about the Stryker," Molica said. "It allows you to cover a great distance in just a matter of hours, and get light infantry into the fight."

Another very positive thing is having the support of the onboard weapons, Lechner said.

"This isn't like a mechanized unit, in which the vehicles form the primary assault force," he said. "The assault force in this unit is the dismounted soldier, but we still have the support of the Mk-19 grenade launcher and the .50-caliber machine gun. That's a huge asset for a platoon leader or company commander."

Asked if he and his soldiers are concerned about the vehicle's relatively light armor, Molica said: "It's always nice to feel that you have enough armor to keep you safe. But you have to realize that the purpose of this vehicle is to get dismounted soldiers to the fight quickly. It's not a tank, and it's not intended to slug it out on the battlefield."

"The bottom line about Stryker is that it is a great platform that will be even better once we've addressed the issues that came up here at NTC," Lechner said. "We've learned a lot about the vehicle and how best to use it, and that was the whole point of coming here."

"Sure there have been challenges, as there always are when you field a new system," Molica said. "But I think Stryker is the right answer for the infantry, and I believe the Army really got it right this time." □

Though certainly not spacious, the Stryker provides adequate room for troops and equipment. The FBCB2 system (screen at center right, above fire extinguisher) provides intelligence and other vital information in real time. Steve Harding

Millennium Challenge 2002

CONGRESSIONALLY directed in the 2001 National Defense Authorization Act, MC 02 was the first all-services warfighting experiment intended to explore how the joint forces of 2007 could conduct rapid and decisive operations against an adaptive, advanced and aggressive enemy.

Sponsored by the U.S. Joint Forces Command in Norfolk, Va., the event took place from July 24 through Aug. 15 at eight actual and 17 simulated locations nationwide. Some 13,000 service members ashore, afloat and in the air evaluated 11 major concepts, 27 joint initiatives and 46 individual service initiatives.

Evaluation of the data gathered during MC 02 was continuing as this issue went to press. — *Steve Harding*